INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

An initiative of
the National Academy of Public Administration,
and the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs
and the Bobst Center for Peace and Justice,
Princeton University

Oral History Program	Series:	Elections
	Interview no.:	E2

Interviewee: George Sarpong

Interviewer: Ashley McCants

Date of Interview: 12 August 2008

Location: National Media Commission
                 Accra
                 Ghana

_____

McCANTS: This is elections interview number three with George Sarpong at the National Media Commission in Accra, Ghana. It is August 12th, 2008 and the interviewer is Ashley McCants. Thank you very much for agreeing to participate in the interview. I like to begin the conversation by learning more about your personal background. Would you describe the position that you hold in the National Media Commission and what your goals are in this position?

SARPONG: *My name is George Sarpong. I am the Executive Secretary of the National Media Commission and as such, I am in charge of the management and administration of the Commission's affairs. I also serve as the Secretary to the Commission when it sits as a board.*

McCANTS: Can you tell me more about the positions that you've held before this one and when your work with election-related jobs began?

SARPONG: *I worked as the Executive Director of the Youth Network for Human Rights and Democracy, a network of seventeen youth organizations that worked to develop the capacity of young people to participate in the democratic discourse in Ghana. In that role, one of the key tasks I performed was coordinating the training activities for the youth wings of the political parties by bringing them together, providing them with capacity-building training to enable them to engage within and across their respective parties. I also worked extensively on election issues, especially in 2004, working with the youth to prevent violence during the elections.*

In my role as Executive Director, I also became a member of the Coalition of Domestic Election Observers (CODEO), an association put together by the Ghana Center for Democratic Development. I was both a coordinator of CODEO and on the Executive Committee. My involvement also extended to coordinating media activities for the Center.

Furthermore, I also consulted extensively on media and governance issues for a couple of organizations, including the German Foundation, and the Chabot Foundation (which supported a lot of media related activities). My work involved assisting in training journalists in Ghana and supporting media-monitoring activities to ensure that the media covered all the political parties fairly. For the [Chabot] Foundation, the project I served as a consultant for also involved following media content to track the performance of the media.

Outside of Ghana, I've also been involved in elections in Sierra Leone, in Cameroon, and (briefly) in Liberia.

McCANTS: What would you say have been the biggest challenges in the current election environment?

SARPONG: *There have been a number of challenging issues. From my perspective, however, the biggest challenge in the elections is the strength of the two leading political parties, the New Patriotic Party (NPP) and the National Democratic Congress (NDC). In my view, both parties have grown enough to be able to wield power in the elections, such that each of them is going into the elections with a clear hope of its possible success. As a result, they are fighting extremely hard.*

_____

_____

In previous elections, there has been a dominant political party that wanted to retain power, and a weak opposition party that wanted to improve its chances – sometimes in Parliament and sometimes just looking to have a bigger influence on policymaking through its parliamentary minority. I think that during the 2000 elections, even though the New Patriotic Party was working very hard, only during the last six months of elections did they realize that the mood and movement of the public significantly garnered in their favor. Until then, most elections generally involved one dominant party competing against the others.

In this particular election, I think that the two leading parties clearly demonstrated their capacity to acquire power, and the pursuit of power is leading them to occasionally adopt unorthodox methods with wide-reaching consequences. They have enough resources to engage the media, and sometimes even attempt manipulation of the media. They have a large enough capacity to engage the Electoral Commission (EC) and sometimes even seek to undermine the credibility of the Electoral Commission. I further think that each one of them has grown enough in capacity to access the court and justice system, thereby raising the stakes in the election. All this contributes to what I see as the most significant challenges in the elections.

McCANTS: Can you characterize the media here, as it was at the beginning of this electoral period? Specifically, how much of it is independent and how much is government controlled? How many newspapers, radio stations and television channels are accessible?

SARPONG: *I think that data is still slightly unreliable. At the last count, we had 166 radio stations. I think there are about four television stations - Metro TV, Ghana television, TV Africa, and TV3 - in Accra. In the western region, I think they have access to Ghana television as well as a local television station, along with Sky Power radio. There is another local television station in Kumasi. What I'm not sure of is how well the signals of the other television stations in Accra reach the other regions nowadays. Essentially, you have a mix of media in different parts.*

Moreover, even though there is an aggregate of about 166 FM stations in the regions of Ghana, their original distribution is also very mixed. I think I could check on the data and share it with you, but as far as I remember, the Ashanti region has the highest number of radio stations (about thirty of them). Accra has a little over twenty, and Brong-Ahafo has about fifteen. The upper-east and upper-west regions have the least access to the media, with just about two stations each.

McCANTS: Are most of these stations independent stations? If so, are are there any government-controlled stations?

SARPONG: *The Ghana Broadcasting Corporation is owned by the state, but we have both state-owned media and privately owned media in Ghana. However, the state-owned media does not fall directly under government control. It operates directly under the National Media Commission where I am working. Hence, we are responsible for the oversight of all such media institutions. The National Media Commission appoints the chief executives and the governing bodies of these institutions. The Constitutions specifically insulate them from government control. Hence, we don't really have government-controlled media since we don't let the state-owned media be controlled by the government.*

_____

McCANTS: Can you tell me more about the way in which the electoral management body, or others that conduct the election employ the media? For example, at what stage and for what purposes does the body decide to employ the media?

SARPONG: *In my opinion, the Electoral Commission in Ghana has built considerable credibility for itself. It works continuously throughout the year, but during the election period — in roughly the last six months before elections, the Commission's employment of the media deepens. I think there are three levels on which they engage the media. The first level is direct media buying; where the Commission buys space and air time to carry their own messages. Then the second level is on responding to media inquiries or issues that the media is interested in. I see the third level as about providing access to the media to cover the activities and events of the Electoral Commission.*

              Therefore, I feel that the Commission does it best in terms of accessibility to the media. The challenge for the Commission is that connections exist between some newspapers in Ghana and political parties. Hence, concerns of the political parties against other political parties are occasionally formulated as problems with the Electoral Commission. For instance, if the National Democratic Congress has a problem with the New Patriotic Party, the issue may be formulated as their having a problem with the Electoral Commission, and the media that are supportive of the NDC would carry the messages as if there is a problem with the Electoral Commission. The NPP does the same.

              As a result, if you don't read between the lines, you may sometimes think that the Electoral Commission is under attack, but usually, it's not really about the Electoral Commission - it's about the two parties fighting across the media space and the Electoral Commission only falls in as a collateral element.

McCANTS: How effective do you think that the Electoral Commission media campaign is in terms of helping people understand what to do and where to go to register and to vote?

SARPONG: *I think that they have done their best, but there is also a lot of jamming and clutter within the media itself. The Electoral Commission is not the only voice on electoral issues. The political parties, civil society and a number of others have a say in these issues. Of course, having such a myriad of voices sometimes creates a lot of confusion as to what exactly is going on. As far as I can tell, this confusion is not due to messages from the Electoral Commission, but rather, is a result of others also putting out their messages, which they have a legitimate interest and right to do.*

              I think that the Commission could, in response, improve their own capacity with regard to the media professionals who work with them, their public relations capacity etc. However, I think that they have essentially done their best, but problems of political parties are still easily formulated as problems of the Electoral Commission.

              Currently, we are handling voter registration. I think that there is considerable anxiety on the part of the political parties concerning the elections and this is reflected in the way they are mobilizing their members to go register and vote. It was very difficult to anticipate this 'panic registration' response of political parties – despite my experience with elections, I wasn't expecting the parties to respond to voter registration in this manner. The Electoral Commission can do very little to change the attitude of the political parties. Unfortunately, this panic registration is also blamed on the Electoral Commission. That is not to make a case for the

_____

_____

Electoral Commission, but I think that if the parties were going through the registration smoothly, we wouldn't have had the problems that we have. Even so, one can still ask questions about the Electoral Commission with respect to their opening of registration centers.

The Commission has announced that it has 5000 centers across the country. It initially only opened about 2005, hoping to reopen the others in the subsequent phase. In hindsight, I think that if they had the resources it would have helped them to have opened the 5000 registration centers. But I still think that even with the 2005, if the political parties had gone through the registration process normally, we would still have had a very successful registration exercise.

McCANTS: What sources of information do you think most people rely on to help them decide what to do in the election? Is it radio, newspapers, television, word of mouth, or oral traditions? What is the most important source of media?

SARPONG: *From the studies I have seen, I believe that the radio is primary and most effective medium most people rely on. Yet I think we need to deepen the analysis. From my own work doing media content analysis here, a substantial part of the content on the radio is derived from the newspapers, with a lot of the political content on the radio originating from newspaper reviews. Hence, if somebody says he gets his news from the radio we need to deepen the analysis to recognize that the radio is only a secondary medium through which content from newspapers gets to the people. Hence, it becomes extremely difficult in my view to say with some degree of exactitude which one is the most important. I would think that all of them are important; each has its own degree of influence.*

Among the middle class, I'd say that the television also has considerable impact; our analysis shows that most middle-class people switch off the radio and turn to television after 7 p.m. Hence from about 6:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m., television consumption among the middle class members that have access to television is very high compared to radio usage.

McCANTS: Have there been any efforts here to use new media such as the internet or cell phone communication? What affect do you think those efforts have had?

SARPONG: *Since computer penetration itself is very limited in Ghana, I think internet usage is also very limited – although I don't have the relevant data to support this opinion. Even so, I think that various stakeholders, such as the political parties, civil society groups and the Election Commission itself are increasingly using the internet as a form of communication. The cellular telephone, especially SMS (Short Message Service) is also increasingly becoming attractive. The SMS texts are not used to communicate direct political information, but for some short, specific announcements.*

The convergence of the radio and telephone is also interesting. In most of the phone-into programs we have in Accra, you see (especially the young) people texting into programs, and program hosts that make considerable effort to read out messages that people are sending them through SMS text. Political parties also send text messages to advertise specific events. I'm hoping that by the next election, SMS will have become a core medium for communicating political information. For now, it has somewhat limited use, in part because it is expensive.

McCANTS: As you just mentioned, contacting voters can be expensive and often difficult if infrastructure is limited. What are the main methods that political parties use to

_____

try to reach potential voters and do you think that any of these methods have particular advantages or disadvantages for the quality of the election?

SARPONG: *While the effectiveness of the communication is a concern, I doubt that the mdoe of communication will affect the quality of the election. I think that in past elections, the political parties have relied more on the mass media – through mass rallies, the television, the radio, and the newspapers. As a result, I thought that the key platforms of communication were the political rallies and the mass media.*

In this particular election, a few of the parties are changing methods. They are doing one-on-one visits, visiting people's homes and offices. They are holding small group discussions in addition to using mass media. It seems to me that we have not seen too many rallies, but this is also the start of the election season so we will probably be getting into the rally mode in the next couple of months, and I do still expect that the parties will use the rally quite heavily. In fact, the New Patriotic Party has a rally tomorrow or the day after in the western region to announce their running mate.

McCANTS: Do political campaigns use the media to disseminate propaganda or negative campaigning and hate speech? Who is in charge of responding to such dissemination and how do they do so?

SARPONG: *Responding in what sense?*

McCANTS: In terms of regulating negative campaigning or hate speech.

SARPONG: *That is our job, the National Media Commission. Sometimes, of course, you hear messages that are worrying, but they are essentially decent in spite of public complaints. When I sit and do a proper, technical and professional analysis of the messages, there are not too many things that they contain that is offensive. You don't see hate speech directly. Sometimes it comes in very subtle forms, such as content that appears to suggest the ethnic inclinations of political parties or candidates. But it is still a very politically incorrect thing to get into, as the parties themselves are aware of, and hence, is carefully avoided by the parties.*

The National Media Commission has responsibility under the Constitution to ensure that the media performs professionally, and the law states in legal language that we are to ensure the highest journalistic standard. Hence, it is our responsibility to make sure that everything that goes on in the media is proper.

Under Article 163 of the Constitution, we are also to ensure that the state-owned media specifically affords fair opportunities to all dissenting opinions. Article 55 (11) of the Constitution also requires that we make sure that the state-owned media affords opportunities to all candidates in the elections, and they will do this very well by making sure that the state-owned media covers everybody fairly and equitably and by ensuring that people do not communicate offensive content through the media.

A caveat: I think I have heard a lot of comments from members of the public and even the politicians and the political parties that they think we [the Commission] are too soft on people. I hear comments such as 'the NMC does not have sanction powers' and that people want us to sanction errant journalists very severely. We have always been extremely careful in talking about sanctions when we talk about the media in Ghana. The history of media development in Ghana is a history of repression and therefore the Constitution made very

_____

elaborate provisions to make sure that those things that happened in the past don't happen.

As a result, the Constitution set up a fairly liberal media environment. Our first primary duty is to promote the freedom and independence of the media. Hence, we are very carefully in taking decisions that will get close to muzzling the press. But when you ask if we have been offended before by media content, you will also understand the perspectives of the politicians when they complain that they want us to hold a big stick to counter and thereby prevent anything offensive, but that is not the way we work.

McCANTS: If you find that a message has gone too far on the media, what kinds of powers do you have to sanction or regulate that?

SARPONG: *That is what I was just trying to say. We don't easily think in terms of sanctions. We think more in terms of retraction, correction and apologies where necessary. So if we look at the material and we think that the content has gone a bit too far, we direct the media that was concerned to retract the content and apologize, and they normally oblige.*

McCANTS: Partisans sometimes try to reduce press coverage they consider favorable to their opponents, maybe by closing the printing press or other resources essential. Has this been a problem here and how do you respond to it?

SARPONG: *Not within the past couple of years. It used to happen, but it would now be very difficult for the government to do such a thing. I think the government may have to get a very good opportunity, such as a case where the public generally thinks that a media house is completely misbehaving, but we have not seen that. We have had comments from government officials expressing frustration with specific media, where they contend that a particular radio station is attacking them or a specific newspaper is against them. But those are very normal complaints from politicians.*

We normally get into it and look at the content, but sometimes it is hard to be sure whether the matter is about the (low) tolerance threshold of the complainant or indicates a real problem with the media. I think that there is certainly some degree of irresponsibility, but much of the complaints come from the zeal of the critics and the austerity of their standards rather than the culpability of the media.

McCANTS: Has the media been used to try to reach out to marginalized populations such as women, youth and the disabled? How effective do you think that has been?

SARPONG: *Some attempts have been made, but I don't think they have been effective. The political parties,, by themselves, have undertaken such outreach efforts – they always been forced into it by advocacy groups. The women's groups in Ghana, for instance, have done extremely well for itself. They developed the Women's Manifesto and somehow forced the political parties to agree that gender is an issue in Ghana here. As a result, you now hear debates during candidate selection, even among the key political parties, about whether their fortunes are bettered by selecting women. I think that is a very positive thing.*

The disabled, especially after the passage of the Disability Bill, are also increasingly making specific demands on political parties. But until this, I don't think the parties specifically targeted them. Now, however, I think that it would be dangerous for any political party to decide to ignore them. So I have seen some

_____

television ads, for example, where some sign language is in the corner to communicate to the people with hearing challenges.

McCANTS: What about groups of people that are particularly hard to reach with information? If I recall correctly, you mentioned the north has fewer radio stations. What steps are taken to reach those people that are in difficult-to-reach areas?

SARPONG: *I think that the political parties work for this; they have tried to set up structures across the country – partly, of course, because of the requirement by law. In such difficult-to-reach areas, I think that they are relying more on their structures in the communities, through mass rallies and the word-of-mouth discussions, one-on-one discussions etc. To tell you the truth, I have doubts about the claims that people make about which particular medium has the greatest impact. As we said earlier, I have seen studies and some of them have high technical quality that show that the radio is the most important source of information. But, there is a difference between being a source of information and being the most persuasive medium. I think that we still do not know which medium has the greatest influence. Sometimes I am inclined to believe that in small communities, people tend to rely more on opinion leaders and the judgment of people they consider enlightened or with greater understanding of the issues than they do on the media.*

McCANTS: If you were asked for advice about how best to convey information in an election in a similar setting as Ghana, what advice would you give?

SARPONG: *Clarify that question again.*

McCANTS: If you were asked for advice about—.

SARPONG: *Asked by whom?*

McCANTS: From an Electoral Commission, how best to utilize the media in an election, what advice would you give?

SARPONG: *That's a difficult one. I don't think that I have any advice that is different from what they do now. Their best bet would be to use multiple channels to reach the people, understanding that each medium has its own plusses and minuses.*

McCANTS: You mentioned earlier that you have also played a role with election observation with CODEO. Can you describe how election monitors are used and what their goals are in monitoring the election?

SARPONG: *First, lets clarify labels. In elections work we make a distinction between election observers and election monitors. The observer is somebody who as the word says, only observes and reports what he or she is seeing. Their influence, therefore, is usually to deter: people know they are observing and therefore they do not try to play tricks. Alternatively, where people deliberately do offensive things, observers have the opportunity to record and document those behaviors and to assess whether or not those things have an impact on the quality of the election. From the second perspective, their work becomes much more important in terms of reflecting towards the next elections.*

Usually, observers may be independent groups that are independent in the sense that they are independent of the Election Management Body and the political parties. A monitor, on the other hand, is usually a part of the election management system, somebody with authority to intervene in the process if he

_____

finds something going wrong. An observer can only observe and record if something is going wrong, but a monitor can directly intervene in the elections. This is the technical distinction we make in election work.

In the context of your question, therefore, I would be glad if I knew—if you want to discuss election monitors or if you are using monitor as a general term for both observers and monitors.

McCANTS: Why don't we start with observers?

SARPONG: _Okay._

McCANTS: How were they used and what were the goals of using observers in the past elections?

SARPONG: _In the previous elections, the goal of using observers had been three-fold. Firstly, observers help build credibility in the elections. The fact that independent people, also wishful of good governance in Ghana, have watched the elections and also certify the election as properly done helps with the credibility of the elections. Secondly, I've already said that the presence of observers in some situations prevents people from wrongdoing. Most people who want to perpetrate fraud in elections want to benefit from the fraud and enjoy it and that works if they can conceal their act. Exposure is always a good deterrent. Also, because the election rules provide criminal sanctions against certain kinds of behaviors, people wouldn't want to perpetrate fraud and be found out. The presence of observers thus forestalls any such thing. The third goal is to see if we can learn lessons that can help improve subsequent elections._

McCANTS: How do decision-makers determine how many observers are needed or how much general observation is necessary, and do they employ both short-term and long-term observers?

SARPONG: _Yes, I think that here we believe strongly that long-term observation is always the best but budget constraints have always made it very difficult to deploy long-term observers. So what we have done here is to carve the electoral process up in bits and to try to monitor each aspect. For example, we would be interested in voter registration and how it is going. I believe that there are observers on the ground now observing and recording their observations._

Then when the Commission opens nominations, observers will also observe the nomination process to be sure that it wasn't skewed in such a way that some interested candidates didn't get fair opportunities to also file their nominations. Then you come to the actual voting day, election day. Observers will want to observe the deployment of electoral materials, the behavior of security agencies and to see whether or not the agencies intimidated people with their presence. They would also be interested in the actual conduct of the ballot, the electoral officials who were there, how agents behaved. They would also be interested in the counting process, the conditions and circumstances under which the ballots were counted, checking to see if there was transparency or if the procedures could have been manipulated.

Observers will also be interested in the declaration of results, especially in the parliamentary elections where the declaration is done at the constituency level. Therefore, we observe each part of the process to the extent that budget constraints allow. We also do pre-election monitoring where we observe the performance of the various media houses and how they respond to the election.

_____

McCANTS: How does the Electoral Commission communicate or liaise with observers? Is there a unit that provides this liaison function?

SARPONG: *CODEO has always had a good relationship with the Electoral Commission and so the Electoral Commission participates in CODEO training activities and then sets the rules about how they want it done. Normally the liaison is the coordination of the coalition with the Electoral Commission at different levels. At the level of the leadership of the Commission, the current Chairman of the Electoral Commission has always been interested in the work of observers. He has always encouraged it. So he would meet when necessary with the leadership of the CODEO to negotiate the operational rules.*

McCANTS: Are there any steps taken to prevent observers from being bought off in advance or threatened on polling day?

SARPONG: *Yes, in most cases political parties are not aware of our deployment strategy. So it would be very difficult for a political party to buy observers because they may not know where that particular observer they are paying will be on election day and whether that person would be useful to them. But the most important thing is the recruitment process for the observers. We are extremely careful in the selection of observers. Normally the membership, the people, the groups that are admitted in CODEO are those with very high credibility. And those recruited also know that both their individual credibility and the credibility of the organizations they are a part of is at stake. Above that, there is also a certain sense in Ghana now that it does not pay to risk your life for a politician. Hence, very few people would be ready to take that kind of a risk on behalf of a political party. Not too many people would want to do it.*

McCANTS: Do you have any advice to offer to others about the use and the management of observers?

SARPONG: *I think observers are extremely useful in improving the credibility and transparency of elections. I have been involved in the training and deployment of observers in Ghana. I have been involved in the training and deployment of observers in Sierra Leone, I've done the same in Cameroon and I'll do it all over again if I have an opportunity anywhere in an election. If I have influence in any election, especially elections in developing or transition countries, I will create observers because they help with the process.*

McCANTS: Are there any other countries whose experiences you have found particularly instructive in your elections work?

SARPONG: *Each election presents its own challenge. You learn from each.*

McCANTS: Is there anything about the context or history of other countries that means that the lessons learned there won't translate well, maybe in Ghana or is there anything that would limit the ability of other people to borrow lessons from Ghana?

SARPONG: *The rules of elections can be the same. I think that there are a lot of things that one can replicate from one area to the other. What you can't be too sure of is the behavior of politicians and political parties. So the biggest lesson is not to take anything for granted and to be as transparent as possible. The means of achieving transparency may vary depending on the context. My advice would be*

_____

that one shouldn't be fussy about what the rules are but the people themselves should be able to agree on the ways to help ensure transparency. I'll give you two example mechanisms we use:

Transparent ballot boxes. In the case of Ghana we arrived at transparent boxes because of allegations of ballot box stuffing that we've had. The kind of box that we use now makes it impossible for anybody to pre-stuff it. I would recommend such boxes for any country that wants transparency in an election. But I wouldn't insist if the objective conditions in that country are such that opaque boxes will work fine. If those are cheaper it makes it much cheaper for them to run the elections.

We have photo ID cards. The process of developing the photo IDs are difficult and expensive. They also partly account for the chaos you have seen in our registration by making the procedure long and tedious. This in turn limits the number of people you can register within a particular time period. But we have had to go that way because we have discovered that it is the safest bet against ghosts from the grave coming to vote. You see what I mean? So if any country wants to adopt photo IDs, my advice would be to please wait a minute, think about it, be sure you understand what you are getting into. Using them is expensive, tedious, and replacing a photo ID is also not easy. So if you lose your photo ID it takes a lot more time to replace it and without it you may not be able to vote. This can be contrasted with countries where they vote by their election slip: here, you register, they tear off the counter foil for you, you keep it and that is your identification for election-day. Both methods are feasible, but it is important to decide which one works best within the conditions for election in a particular country.

McCANTS: What role do you think this election will play in the overall democratic development of Ghana?

SARPONG: *It is an election that we must succeed at. If we manage this election well we would have done considerably well on our part towards democratic consolidation. But, as I have said, I think that all of us need to work harder to make this election successful. It is going to be successful but there is no room for complacency due to each side being sure that it can win the election. Across the world, where parties are this sure of the possibility of success, every single vote counts for them and so they tend to fight over almost every little detail of the election. And the people's sensitivity to elections is one of the biggest triggers to conflict across the world. So we need to be particularly careful. But if we are able to pull through this one, I would think that we would be on our way now to create democratic consolidation.*

McCANTS: Thank you so much for your time.

SARPONG: *Thank you.*